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Scholarly Pursuits: The Inequality of Illness

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard—but it has been harder on vulnerable populations

The Inequality of Illness

Multiple LAS faculty received grants from DePaul to pursue different studies that analyze health equity and COVID-19.

Traci Schlesinger, associate professor of sociology, is examining the impact of changes in policies to limit the spread of COVID-19 in prisons on the spread and deadliness of the disease in state and federal prisons and in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities.

Limited access to soap and hygiene facilities, the inability to socially distance and a medically vulnerable population all increase detainees' risk of contracting and dying from the disease. As a result, since March, more than 80% of the nation's top 25 hot spots for COVID-19 have been prisons or jails, according to Schlesinger.

For her project, Schlesinger examined whether policies and practices, such as providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to incarcerated people, halting admissions and releasing medically vulnerable people or those who are nearing the end of their sentence, have led to either

significant levels of decarceration or a slowing of the spread of COVID-19 in these facilities.

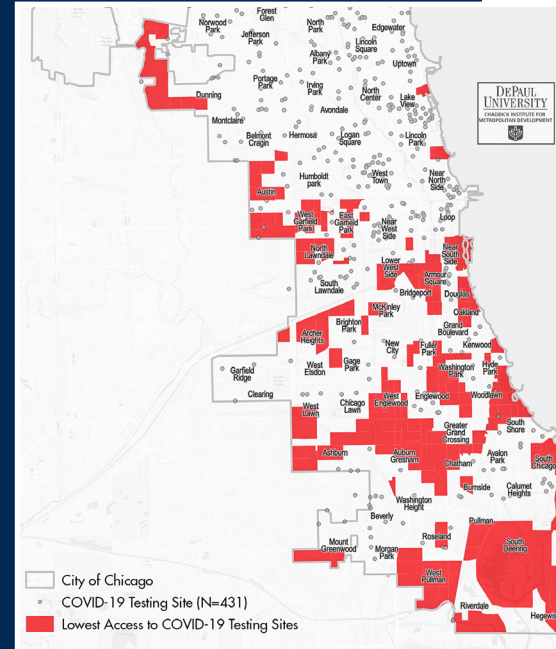
"The question becomes, what are the effects of each of these policies? How do these policies, which are being applied a lot, a little or not at all in various states, affect this pandemic?"

Schlesinger intends to make her data available to the public.

Euan Hague, professor of geography and director of the School of Public Service (SPS), is part of a team investigating the extent to which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and previous health conditions explain the disparities in outcomes from COVID-19 in Chicago.

According to recent data, individuals in counties that are majority African American are three times more likely to get infected and six times more likely to die from COVID-19 than those living in majority white counties. In the City of Chicago, African Americans are dying from coronavirus at six times the rate of whites.

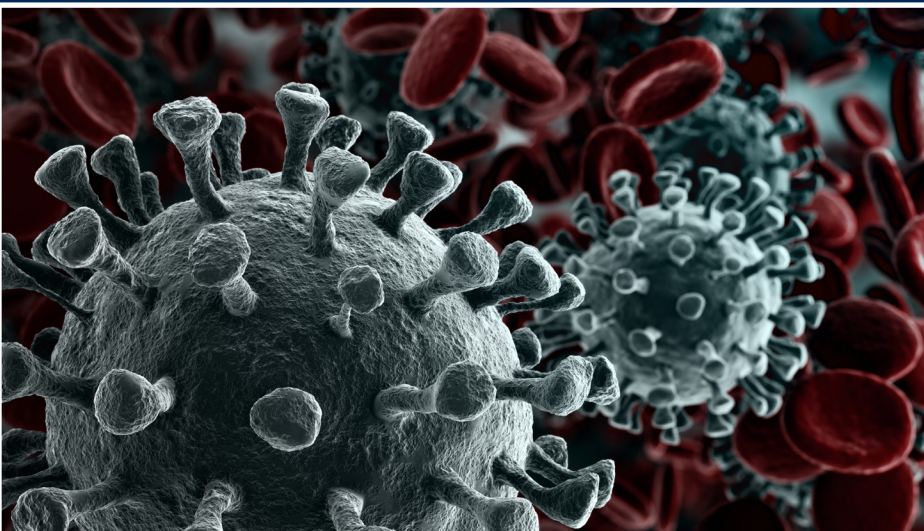
The project is a collaboration between units within LAS's Urban Collaborative:



Data for this map taken from Illinois Department of Public Health, Chicago Department of Public Health and Electronic Lab Reporting.

SPS, the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development and the Center for Community Health Equity, the latter co-founded by DePaul and Rush University Medical Center. The team, which includes Hague, Joe Schwieterman, a professor in SPS and director of the Chaddick Institute, C. Scott Smith, assistant director of the Chaddick Institute, and GIS Coordinator Cassandra Follet, is comparing data on neighborhood demographics, gender, race, income and education level with COVID-19 patient data from Rush.

Using various spatial and statistical techniques, they have identified and mapped highly vulnerable neighborhoods in the city. They have also developed a multimodal model to estimate access to COVID-19 testing facilities. The team will also be working to better understand disease transmission dynamics on different travel modes in order to predict the effectiveness of different public health interventions.



LAS faculty are researching the intersection between health equity and COVID-19.